A Thought a Day for Lent

By

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FIRST DAY (Ash Wednesday)

God's Own Sermon

"Remember, man, that thou art dust."—Roman Missal.

THERE is a sermon that is always being preached, not by the tongue of man, but by the myriad voices of God's vast universe. Day and night, without ceasing, in every land, among all peoples, in the universal language of nature—the language that is foreign to none of the children of men—God is preaching his sermon. He is whispering it upon every breeze, booming it with every thunderclap, flashing it upon the clouds with the lightnings. His message is trailing its way in a blaze of fire across the sky "from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof." All nature is a panorama created to illustrate the sermon of God, painted in colors gay and somber by turn to catch the fickle eye of man, the spectator. All the universe is one vast stage for the enacting of the drama that God has written. All human history is a pageant, a never-ending procession passing before the bewildered eyes of mankind, and upon every banner in that pageant is written the motto that God would have us read. And yet this obvious lesson is one we never learn. The sermon is one to which we will not listen. The pageant passes in review, but we gaze as in a stupor, seeing but not understanding. For the sermon, the lesson, the play, the pageant, the spectacle, is "Life and *Death.*"

SECOND DAY

This Lent, Not Next Lent

"Now is the acceptable time."—2 Cor. vi. 2.

THERE is a decided ring of modernity, one might almost say of American modernity, in that phrase, "Now is the time." If there is one thing that the alert American business man has learned above all things else, it is the value of the present moment. His favorite slogan is "Do it now." If there be one vice that he despises above all else, it is procrastination. "Let others," says he, "cultivate the *mañana* habit. Let them say, 'To-morrow, and to-morrow.' We say, 'To-day.' "

Much eloquence has been expended by preachers on the folly of deathbed repentance. But perhaps no one has hit it off so aptly as Young:

> Procrastination is the thief of time;
> Year after year it steals, till all are fled,
> And to the mercies of the moment leaves
> The vast concerns of an eternal scene.

The deathbed penitent leaves "vast concerns" to the "mercies of the moment."

THIRD DAY

Conversing with God

WE cannot persuade the natural man of the reality of mystical experiences. He will say: "Imagination. Delusion. Catholic saints, Quakers, Quietists, Swedenborgians, Theosophists, are to be placed in the same category—fanatics all." Meanwhile, we shake the head and say, "No. You misunderstand." "Then explain to me," says he. "I will listen. Explain how you know that God talks to you." The mystic answers, "We cannot explain. We know because we know," and the skeptic laughs and says, "I thought so." But how can he ever be taught? He will not try. He will not submit to the discipline. He will not go into silence. He dreads solitude, especially the solitude of the soul. He cannot hear the voice of God unless God thunders at him. But God is a Spirit, and the Spirit breathes—whispers. "He breathed on them." To hear God, one must be quiet enough to hear a breath, and they that will not be quiet, will never hear.

There are objects that cannot be seen by certain eyes. There are truths that cannot be proved to certain minds. Music and poetry, for example, mean nothing to those who have not the soul to hear and to feel. So of the voice of God. You cannot hear it unless your ear is attuned, unless your soul is trained. You attune the ear and train the soul in solitude, in reflection, in meditation, in prayer.

FOURTH DAY

Waiting on God

IS God a slave who must go when He is sent and return when He is called? Men say to a slave, "Be gone! Out of my sight! When I need thee, I shall call thee, and when I call, come instantly." So we dismiss God for a day, a week, a year, and we expect Him to leap from the ground or to descend from the sky when we clap our hands or call, "Lord! Lord!"

When Jesus was anxious to speak to Pilate, Pilate turned his back. When, afterwards, Pilate spoke to Jesus, he got no answer.

One of the hardest sayings in all the Scripture is that of Our Lord to the ministers sent by the rulers and Pharisees to apprehend Him: "You shall seek Me, and shall not find Me" (John vii. 34).

FIFTH DAY

Impurity

THE particular malice of impurity is the profanation of the temple of God. No man can understand it unless he have a touch of mysticism. A matter-of-fact person with a tendency toward naturalism, if not materialism, will say that this kind of sin is the most *natural* thing in the world, a reminiscence of our animal or barbarian or savage ancestry. He will say that we have come up through animalism, and that we have not yet got entirely into a higher grade of being. We are on the way, but still we are animals. But Revelation tells another story. We are children of God. We are the temple of God. Our bodies are endowed with a supernatural dignity. We are not in the animal class. We are in a class by ourselves, midway between beasts and angels. "What is man that thou art mindful of him? . . . Thou hast made him a little less than the angels, thou hast crowned him with glory and honor" (Ps. viii. 5, 6). We are not flesh and blood alone. We are flesh and blood and mind and soul and the indwelling God. We are members of the mystic Body of Christ. Impurity is violation of a body that belongs to Christ. Its malice, so understood, is infinite. "Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of a harlot?" says St. Paul. "God forbid!" (1 Cor. vi. 15.)

SIXTH DAY

Calling Good Evil

THE impure justify sin and scold or ridicule the pure. They inject impurity into art, literature, life. To them, it is joy, gaiety. It is nature. It is beauty. On the other hand, purity, they say, is prudery. Modesty is an affectation. A saint is a kill-joy. And so on and so on. The impure really believe these things. It is probably a mistake to imagine that they are salving their consciences with these statements, knowing them to be false. They think them true. "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see"; cursed are the impure, for they cannot see. Perhaps they will never see. What can be done with them? Nothing, perhaps, until the fire of passion burns down and the smoke of vice clears away. Then they may turn to God and offer Him a burned-out body, broken, incapable of passion, and a soul embittered, disgusted, disillusioned. They turn to God for a possible solace and for fear of a possible Hell. Is this religion?

SEVENTH DAY

The Measure of Morality

BY what shall we measure morality? By the dicta of theologians? If they acquit us, shall we account ourselves wholly virtuous? Is a sacramental absolution all that we desire? Having received the absolution, can we be free and happy and satisfied, or shall we cry, *Amplius lava me*—"Wash me yet more"—after we have been cleansed by the sacrament of forgiveness?

"Christian morality is no mere self-restraint, no mechanical movement within prescribed rules, no mere punctiliousness, but ardent and active, exceeding duty and outstripping requirement" *(Ecce Homo)*.

The slavish Christian asks, "What do the theologians say? Is it venial sin, or mortal sin, or imperfection, or no sin at all? What is the probable opinion? I shall learn that, and then do what I may without mortal sin." What an abomination that a Christian should take advantage of theology to outwit God! The Pharisees followed the Talmud in place of the Word of God. They put the traditions of the ancients on a par with the divine Scripture, or above it. Shall we seize upon casuistic decisions to defeat or to avoid the good pleasure of God? Has Christ taught in vain? To consult theologians in order to avoid consulting God, is Phariseeism.

EIGHTH DAY

The Soul's Last Chance

THE most terrible crime is to smother the inspirations of the indwelling God. This is the unpardonable sin. Conscience may be so many times beaten down that finally it has not the courage to rise and speak. Even God may become discouraged. Jesus said, "If I speak to you, you believe not," so He was silent. When God is discouraged and gives no more inspirations, when He grows weary and will no longer say, "Do this," or "Do that," then probation is over, the soul is lost, and eternal darkness has begun. The rest of life is only *prolixitas mortis*, the delay of death. The unpardonable sin has been committed.

This is the most horrible risk that the habitual sinner takes. Any inspiration of God may be the last. The warning in conscience may never be repeated. The last whisper of Christ dies within the sinner's soul. He will never hear God or conscience again. If so, he imagines that he is safe. He hears no rebuke, he feels no compunction. He says, "I have outgrown my former scrupulosity. I am no longer so narrow in my views. I am become free." But he is lost.

NINTH DAY

Hearing the Voice of God

A MAN practised in woodcraft, out of a babel of sounds in a tropical forest, will recognize any one. He may hear the calls of a hundred, a thousand, different species of birds, squawking, hooting, whistling, singing, but he says, "There! listen to the note of such and such a bird." The novice strains his ears, but cannot catch the particular sound. "I listen," says he, "but I cannot recognize it. How can you know it?" And the master says, "I could tell that note if every leaf on every tree had a different voice and all were speaking. I could tell that note in the midst of any tumult."

So, the man who knows the voice of God, hears it anywhere—in the midst of crowded streets, at an entertainment, on a battle field, in his soul, even when temptation is making pandemonium within. He can recognize the voice of God anywhere.

TENTH DAY

The Truth Only in Confession

"THOU, O Lord, didst turn me round into my own sight. I had set myself, as it were, upon my own back, because I was unwilling to see myself, and now Thou didst place me before my own eyes, so that I beheld how ugly I was, how deformed and filthy and spotted and ulcerous. I beheld and shuddered, yet whither could I flee from myself? Thou didst force my eyes to gaze upon my very features so that I might discover and loathe my iniquity. I knew it, but feigned ignorance and winked at it and forgot it" (St. Augustine, *Confessions,* viii. 7).

The primary advantage of confession is that it tells us the truth about ourselves. It is like a rehearsal for the day of judgment. Nowhere else can we get the actual truth. Friends flatter us. Enemies malign us. They both deceive us. We shall never see ourselves as we really are, until we look into the mirror of the eyes of God in the day of our particular judgment. But here on earth we can anticipate that terrible interview, every time we practise confession, if we examine our conscience honestly, and accuse ourselves unshrinkingly. But we must not "feign ignorance," or "wink at our iniquity."

ELEVENTH DAY

Temptation

"WATCH ye, and pray that ye enter not into temptation" (Matt. xxvi. 41). Generally, we place the emphasis upon *"watch and pray."* Why not sometimes put it upon the other words, *"that ye enter not"?* Once we are actually in temptation—deeply in—it may be too much for us. Temptation produces a peculiar intoxication of the mind, a sort of paralysis of the will, an hypnosis of the soul, or, on the other hand, a diabolical recklessness, and sin becomes almost inevitable. It is better to stave off temptation, not to "enter in."

If, however, temptation comes, we shall still fight our hardest, knowing that we can always win.

The advice of Polonius to Laertes is not bad, for a conflict either between man and man or between man and the devil:

> Beware
> Of entrance to a quarrel, but being in,
> Bear't that the opposéd may beware of thee.

TWELFTH DAY

Preparation against Temptation.

THE secret of success in the conflict with sin is, in these wise words of Father Maturin: "We know well enough what is definitely right and what is wrong, but there is something else, in itself neither right nor wrong, belonging to the debatable land, the borderland between right and wrong, the region neither of light nor darkness, but of twilight." The soul that dwells under the law of this land, will certainly end in passing over into the kingdom of darkness and sin. The heat of the battle does not lie in the direct conflict with evil, but with things neither right nor wrong. The man who determines he will not do what is positively wrong, but will do everything else that he wishes, will find, in the long run, that he cannot stand far off from actual sin."—*Self-Knowledge and Self-Discipline*, p. 96.

The moral, therefore, is to get ready for the battle before the battle begins. An enervated soldier, fat and soft and accustomed to luxury, cannot fight. When the rigor of discipline is applied in times of peace, he may protest, "The war is not on. I shall go easy." The answer is simple: The war is always on. They win in wartime who win in peacetime—preparation for battle is part of the battle.

THIRTEENTH DAY

Fighting Temptation

WHEN a man is attacked, he must defend himself with every means at hand. The soldier in the trench shoots his rifle, flings hand-grenades, bombs, bits of steel, sticks, stones; he jabs with his bayonet, fights with hands, feet, teeth, anything, everything. So when the devil attacks, fight him with anything at hand—with reason, with shame, with defiance, with the name of Jesus, the sign of the cross, with the remembrance of one's dignity, with the thought of confession, with remembrance of the altar-rail, with anything, everything—but win at all hazards.

The devil has no chivalry. If we have a weak spot, he will attack us in that spot. If while we fence with him, he knocks the sword from our hand, he will give us no chance to recover the weapon. He has no scruples, no principles, no honor. When we battle with Satan, there is no time for a display of knightly courtesies. Fight him relentlessly.

FOURTEENTH DAY

Confidence

"THE slothful man saith: There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the midst of the streets" (Prov. xxii. 13). In temptation we are inclined to say, "There is a lion within, I shall be slain if I face him."

It is recorded that when the martyrs faced the lions in the arena, frequently the lions turned tail and fled. A wild-beast hunter has said that any animal will run from a man, *if the man is unafraid.* If we face the beast, *and are unafraid,* he will slink away. Satan, too, is a coward. Face him fearlessly and he will disappear.

How can we be certain of ourselves? Only if God be in the soul. "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? . . . If armies in camp should stand against me, my heart shall not fear" (Ps. xxxvi. 1, 3).

FIFTEENTH DAY

The God and the Brute in Human Nature

THE question is asked, "What is man? A brute or a god?" The answer is, "Both." A certain American poet prefers animals to men because, he says, the beasts "do not complain about their sins." But neither do they boast of the deity within them. The brute is simple enough. He is only a brute. But man is complex. He is a brute and a god. That is why he complains of his sins. If he were only a god, he would have no sin. If he were only a beast, he would know no sin. But he is both. There is the anguish. There is the cause of strife and restlessness, of divine discontent.

"I am a worm and no man." "I am a child of God." Each statement alone is false. Both statements together are true. "Man is an animal," is false, if you say nothing more. "Man is a spirit," is false, if you say nothing more. Put the two together—the animal and the spirit, the beast and the angel—and you have that mysterious, incomprehensible, apparently impossible combination that is called man, the divine clod, the spiritual beast, the celestial clay, infinite nothingness, the "paragon of animals," and the "quintessence of dust."

SIXTEENTH DAY

Not Altogether Bad

IT is a mistake in spiritual tactics, and it is dishonor to God, to cringe and to cry, "Oh God, there is no good in me. I am altogether bad." We are not Calvinists. We do not believe in total depravity. If a man keeps on telling himself, and telling God, that he is totally bad, he will make himself bad by auto-suggestion, if by no other means. And in that case, when he falls, he will be in danger of saying, "What can I expect of myself? I can do no better." On the other hand, if he believes in his dignity as a human soul, a child of God, he will not fall so easily nor so often, and if he falls he will be shocked quickly back into repentance. He will recoil from sin not merely because he respects himself, but because he stands in awe of God within him.

SEVENTEENTH DAY

Lowering the Moral Tone

"WE turn away at first in disgust and shrinking from sins that later on enslave us. We have not yet been sufficiently habituated to other things which relax the soul and weaken the voice of conscience and *lower the moral tone*" (Father Maturin). There is the secret: "lower the moral tone." If this be done, anything may happen, and when it happens, it will not seem horrible. Even ugly sins will appear beautiful. A year ago, ten years ago, a man would have been shocked or disgusted at the very mention of them. To-day he not only commits them, but justifies them. His moral tone has been lowered.

Physicians tell us that diseases are caught only by those whose vitality is lowered. Athletes explain defeat by saying, "I was out of condition." If our spiritual vitality is high, sin cannot find a lodging place in the soul. If we are "in condition," Satan himself cannot defeat us.

EIGHTEENTH DAY

Conscience

NEWMAN calls conscience "the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." It is that, and more. Even the Pope has less authority than conscience. The dictates of conscience are, in a true sense, the dictates of God. It is conceivable that one might obey the Vicar of Christ only when he commands. But one should obey God whether He commands or merely suggests. What folly then to say, "Conscience in this case only insinuates. I may disobey; when it commands great things, I shall obey." It is as though one said, "God gives me a hint, a suggestion, or expresses a wish, but He has not said, 'Do,' or 'Do not,' 'Thou shalt,' or 'Thou shalt not,' and until He gives me a commandment or a prohibition, I shall do as I please. I am not bound to heed every wish of God." One who thinks or acts thus has no idea of the majesty of God—or of conscience.

NINETEENTH DAY

Sin and Peace

THE sinner cries, "Peace! peace!" but there is no peace. He has tortured conscience, and in turn, conscience tortures him. There might be peace if man could be dehumanized. If God would only say, "You act like a beast, and therefore a beast shall you be. I extract your conscience. I leave you only a brute." But no, conscience remains, and while conscience remains, there can be no peace in sin.

A man may reply, "You are mistaken. I sin and sin repeatedly, and yet I feel no unhappiness. I am content." We retort, "You are abnormal, sub-human. You are a freak of nature. You are a monstrosity, a terrible curiosity, a man without a soul." For a man without a conscience is a man without a soul.

He may be content, but he is worse off than if he were discontent. Discontent might goad him to virtue. The sting of conscience is evidence that God has not abandoned the soul. To be abandoned by God, is to begin one's hell. "Where Thou art, there is heaven, and where Thou art not, there is death and grievous hell."

TWENTIETH DAY

Sin and the Religious Nature

HERE is a curious and terrible anomaly. One may have a religious temperament, and yet be immoral. St. Augustine was essentially religious, and yet remained for many years in an evil life. One even greater than St. Augustine, King David, was passionately religious. In the Psalms, even before his conversion, he speaks to God, he thinks aloud to God, discusses everything with God, and yet he fell into terrible sin, murder, and adultery.

Those who are accustomed to form snap judgments are quick to cry "hypocrite" if a man professes fine principles, and yet lives ignobly. But perhaps he is not a hypocrite. He may really believe in and admire the very highest spiritual doctrine. He may have the saints for his heroes. He may love and desire sanctity, and yet be spasmodically, if not habitually, sinful. "The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." For virtue and for salvation, something more than a religious temperament is necessary. That "something more" is the constant grace of God.

TWENTY-FIRST DAY

The Sting of Temptation

THERE is a horrible fascination about sin even while the will is rejecting it. And the acme of the agony is that the fascination is not simply over the lower members. If the will and the reason were solid and sure against the rebellion of the flesh, there could be no very great danger. The veins might run with liquid fire, and all the bodily frame feel the fierce heat of passion, but if the will were wholeheartedly against sin, the temptation would be insignificant. But the will wills, and wills not, at one and the same time. There is the mystery and there is the torture.

St. Augustine says: "The will commands the body and there is instant obedience. The mind commands the body and there is instant rebellion. The mind commands the will, and though it is one and the same, it will not hear." "The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh." That were temptation enough. But the true temptation is when the spirit lusteth against the spirit.

TWENTY-SECOND DAY

Hired Jesters

IN ancient days, kings and nobles had their court fools, to jest and play pranks when there was danger that serious thoughts might come; and we to-day hire buffoons and jesters, and we pay them well, to banter away every serious thought. Our entertainments, our amusements, are part of the conspiracy to prevent our thinking upon life and death and what comes after death. The theaters and dance halls, fashionable restaurants and cabarets, are not frequented by those who are spontaneously gay, but by those who are gloomy. They seek an artificial means of dispelling the gloom. They fear a quiet evening at home almost as much as they would dread a day of spiritual retreat. They must not be alone with their thoughts. Hence the need of an army of actors and actresses, and "entertainers." When the king was melancholy, the court fool was to make him smile. When we are melancholy, the hired comedians must make us forget. Their business is to drive away "the demon, thought." But some day we shall have to think. Why not do it now?

TWENTY-THIRD DAY

"The Children of the Kingdom"

WHEN John the Baptist upbraided the Jews and threatened them with possible damnation, they retorted indignantly, "We are the children of Abraham." But John the Baptist only replied, "Children of Abraham! I say to you that God is able, of these stones, to raise up children to Abraham." And Christ told them, "Many shall come from the east and the west and shall sit down with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but the children of the kingdom shall be cast out." Two things Christ Our Savior hated particularly: first, hypocrisy, and, second, mechanical religion. The second is as bad as the first. The Pharisees were guilty of both. They wore their phylacteries broad. They followed the traditions of the ancients. They fasted. They were rigorists for discipline. Yet Jesus told them that the harlots would enter the kingdom of God before them.

There are those to-day who fancy that their salvation is secure, because they have been validly baptized, because their brow has been signed with the sign of the cross, because they attend religious service with fair regularity, because they make their Easter duty, and because they expect to be anointed with oil on their deathbed. But if they neglect "the weightier things of the law," justice, mercy, charity, purity, their fate has already been spoken. The harlots shall enter the kingdom of heaven sooner than they.

TWENTY-FOURTH DAY

Those Who Will Not Think

THERE are those who deny or ignore the importance of human life. They have no philosophy. They practise no religion. To them human existence presents no problems. They have never spent a sleepless night or even one intense moment pondering over the question of their eternal destiny. Some of them are pleasure-lovers, and their motto is, *Dum vivimus, vivamus*—"While we live, let us live." "Eat, drink, and be merry." They also have another motto, which, however, they do not shout aloud, "Whatever you do, don't think. Thought is fatal to contentment. If you would be joyful, don't think." To such as these, a time like Lent, which is a time for serious thought, of meditation on profound mysteries, is only an intrusion, an impertinence. They will have none of it. Their entertainments, their jollifications, their reckless amusements, continue throughout the Lenten season as at other times. Nothing can persuade them to stop and think.

TWENTY-FIFTH DAY

The Individual Judgment

SINCE the war, many books have been printed, and sermons and lectures delivered, upon the morality of nations. It has become customary for men to speak of nations as if they were individuals; as if virtue and vice, and free-will and responsibility, could be predicated of a nation as of an individual. Men speak of the "Responsibility of Germany," "The Soul of Russia," "The Fate of Austria," "The Crimes of England," "The Destiny of Ireland," and so on. Now all these phrases are only metaphorically true. Edmund Burke, the great statesman, declared that you must not make an indictment against a whole nation. Likewise, you must not impute responsibility or guilt or vice or virtue to a whole nation. Neither Russia nor England will be judged by the eternal Judge. Neither France nor Germany will be called upon to give an account of its stewardship. But every individual in every nation will be judged. We shall never reform the world by pooling our responsibilities, by imputing sin to a nation. But if we can persuade every individual that he, personally, is accountable before God on the day of judgment, then indeed shall the face of the earth be changed.

TWENTY-SIXTH DAY

Character

RALPH WALDO EMERSON, one of the chief spokesmen for naturalism, says: "Every landscape I behold, every friend I meet, every act I perform, every pain I suffer, leaves me a different man than they found me." We Christians go infinitely beyond such philosophers as Emerson. We say, not only that all these experiences leave us different than they found us, but that they have *eternal* consequences. All that we do or think or suffer in life not only makes or unmakes our character, but determines our destiny. Every prayer we say, or refuse to say, every good inspiration we accept or reject, every temptation we endure, all our successes and failures, our victories and defeats, are written with a "pen of iron and the point of a diamond" in the fiber of our souls, and on this written record we shall be judged.

On the day of judgment God will not ask, "What have you done?" but "What are you?" If we know what a man is, we know something infinitely more important. To do something is good advice. To be something is better. We shall be saved or lost not by accident, not by magic, not by force of circumstances, but by what, with God's grace, we have made of ourselves.

TWENTY-SEVENTH DAY

The Indelible Record

IF a man, in the course of a speech in court or in Congress, speaks a word in passion and later retracts and begs that the word be counted as not said, it may be expunged from the record. But there is no expunging from the eternal record. The recording angel says curtly, like Pilate, *Quod scripsi, scripsi*—"What I have written, I have written." From the very beginning of the use of reason until the moment of our last sigh, everything that we have done and thought and felt and suffered, is recorded, and on the day of judgment our fate shall depend upon that record. Some one has said wisely, "Sow an act and reap a habit, sow a habit and reap a destiny." This is good Catholic doctrine. There is no other doctrine that makes life or character so important. We impute an eternal, an infinite, value to character.

TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY

The Meaning of Life

TO judge from the way we spend our days, life might be only a comedy. Throughout the year, we pass the time, working and playing, eating and drinking, and making merry, as if these were the sum total of the things that concern us; as if our existence upon this earth had no very profound meaning; as if life were indeed a comedy, marred occasionally by the intrusion of some painful episodes, but generally pleasant and sure to end happily. The truth is that life is tragic. We know that best when we are alone, alone with God.

The life that appears upon the surface is a sham. The soul-life, the inner life, the life of mental and spiritual struggle, is terribly real. Its considerable and inconclusive victories, its tragic failures, and the always impending possibility of final disaster, make even the most prosaic life dramatic, if not tragic.

As with life, so with religion. Superficially, our religion seems to be a matter of routine, of form, of ceremony and regular observance. In the lives of some it even appears to be a matter of play, of enjoyment, a high sort of pleasure. But, fundamentally, religion is solemn and awful. The basic fact of our faith is a hideous tragedy, the Crucifixion. In the Lenten season we look beneath the surface of life, delve deeper down into profound mystery, into the suffering and death of the Son of God.

TWENTY-NINTH DAY

Salvation as a Gamble

SOME seem to imagine that we are saved or lost by chance. Salvation is good luck. Damnation is bad luck.

Remember the legend of the sinner who fled from the plague in Florence, lifting up his voice and crying out: "I have outwitted Thee, *Domeneddio.*" But he came back too soon to the pest-ridden city, fell ill, and on his deathbed cried out: "Thou hast outwitted me, *Domeneddio.*" He played a game of chance against God, and lost. Some moderns seem to have the same idea. "I may sin," they say, "but if I get to confession and receive absolution before anything happens to me, I shall be saved. I may go about the streets in the state of mortal sin. If I meet with an accident, I shall be damned; but, barring accident, I shall be saved." "Take a chance," is their motto.

We can understand a gambler staking a thousand dollars on the turn of a wheel, or the color of a card; we can understand the speculator staking a year's earnings, or a fortune, on the rise or the fall of a market; we can understand an emperor risking his throne on the battle field. But what of the man who will risk his everlasting soul in a gamble against God or against the devil?

But what a curious concept of salvation, and of damnation. Salvation is not to be had by luck. It is an abiding condition of soul. It is achieved not by accident, but by constant strife, by repeated victory, by permanent character.

THIRTIETH DAY

Death

SUPPOSE it were said, "You shall make ready for a journey. You shall start immediately. You shall make no stops. You shall continue straight on to your destination, and when you arrive at your destination, you shall die." Suppose? It is no supposition. We have begun the journey. We are on our way. We shall make no stops. We shall arrive more quickly than we think at our destination. And death is our destination.

We shudder at the thought of a condemned criminal counting off his days on a calendar hung upon the wall of his cell. So many days remaining, and again so many days—and so few! The condemned criminal knows how many days remain to him. When he checks off a day, he realizes fully what it means. We do not know how many days remain to us. And when we come to the end of a day, we turn the page of our calendar without any realization of what it means. Yet we may be nearer to the end of our calendar than the man in the death cell. The criminal adds and subtracts hours and minutes and seconds. Our hours and minutes and seconds are numbered. Says Our Savior, "The hairs of your head are numbered."

THIRTY-FIRST DAY

Sin Is Slavery

ALMOST everyone who sins, claims to do so in the name of freedom. "I am my own master, I plan my own life, I shall do what I please. No one shall prevent me. Am I not free? Is not my life my own? I will not be bound with restrictions, rules, regulations, commandments."

But listen to such a one five years, ten years, twenty years hence. Sickening of sin, he would return to God. His spiritual director says to him, "Be strong. Assert your independence. Break away from evil habits. Stand erect. Stiffen your moral backbone. Set your jaw firm. Defy the devil. Be free." And he replies: "Father, you know not what you are asking. Sin has enchained me. Habit has enslaved me. I cannot assert myself. I have tried and have failed again and again. I have lost confidence. My courage is broken. I am a slave."

Sin is not freedom. Sin is slavery.

THIRTY-SECOND DAY

Hell

LET the word stand. It was spoken by Our Savior. We cannot retract it. We will not apologize for it. Naturally, men do not like the word. But our liking or our disliking can neither create nor annihilate a fact. Men deny hell. But they also denied Christ. Christ was not false because men denied Him. They deny God, but God does not wither away. They deny sin. They cry, "There is no sin. There is no sin." But sin remains, as big as a mountain. You cannot frighten away sin with a loud cry. You cannot demolish hell by denying it.

Dives, the rich man in the Gospel, did not believe in hell. He believed in eating and drinking and making merry. He believed in good things and a good time, but when he died, says Our Savior, he was "buried in hell." Then he cried out, "I am tormented in this flame. Send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water to cool my tongue." Abraham replied, "Between us and you there is fixed a great chaos." Still he cries again, "O Father, send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify unto them lest they also come into this place of torments." But Abraham again replied, "They have Moses and the prophets. If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, if one rise again from the dead."

THIRTY-THIRD DAY

The Courage of Christ

CHRIST loved to call Himself the "Lamb of God," but He was also the "Lion of the tribe of Juda." Courageous, fearless, uncompromising, absolutely self-consistent, incapable of being browbeaten, unabashed before kings, unflinching when in the hands of bloodthirsty barbarians. He flung out His anathemas against those in high places, pointing the finger at them, calling them by name. He was incorrigibly reckless about His own safety. He never apologized. He never recanted. On trial for His life before a vacillating governor, He might have had His freedom, if He had simply opened His mouth and demanded justice. The Roman would have been compelled to give Him justice. But Jesus uttered no plea. He was stripped and whipped, as a foretaste of the tortures in store for Him, but He never whimpered. True, He uttered a cry of anguish in the garden. But it was sin, nor torture, that wrung that cry from His heart. There is no record of any cry when He came to the top of the Hill of Calvary and was bidden to lie down and be nailed to the wood. The burly Roman soldiers might have learned a lesson in bravery from Him.

His example has been the inspiration of all the martyrs. Young girls and boys in the amphitheater were braver than the noblest Romans. Jesus is the "strength of martyrs."

THIRTY-FOURTH DAY

The Terrible Meek

THE character of Christ is paradoxical. He is meek and humble and non-resisting. But He is unyielding as adamant. Any sinner in the streets of Jerusalem might hoot at Him, and arouse not resentment, but pity. The thief on the cross could blaspheme against Him, and be granted paradise upon repentance. It might have seemed to some, that Jesus was absurdly mild. But no one could intimidate Him. Neither Pilate nor Herod could overawe Him. Perhaps the reason that Pilate "went out," was that he was withering under the glance of the forlorn Nazarene. He could not bear the look in the Savior's eye. As for Herod, he could not even persuade Jesus to speak a word. Jesus was not uneasy. But the King and the Governor were both in dismay.

The saints, particularly the martyrs, are like Christ. they are as gentle as doves, and as courageous as tigers. Face to face with death, they make no plea for pity. They laugh in the face of an Emperor. They spit on the statues of the gods. With eighty thousand pagans in the *Circus Maximus* howling at them, they do not even blanch. They are masters of the Emperor, and of the mob.

THIRTY-FIFTH DAY

Peter

THERE may be those who claim to feel secure against mortal sin. They are offended at the bare supposition that they may possibly be damned. They say: "I need not be threatened with hell-fire and damnation. I am not to be bulldozed. I am no criminal. There need be no fear of my going astray."

The answer is Peter. Prince of the Apostles, first Pope, chosen of God—yet he swore before high heaven—and three times—that he *never knew* Jesus Christ!

"The cedars of Lebanon have fallen. Stars have fallen from heaven. They whose works seemed praiseworthy have fallen to the very lowest. They that did eat the Bread of angels, have been found contented with the husks that were thrown to the swine." "Who art thou, O man, that thou dost glory?"

THIRTY-SIXTH DAY

JUDAS

THE cup of Our Savior was filling. Every drop was bitterer than the one before. Loneliness, discouragement, disappointment, profound sadness, had settled down upon His heart. Now comes a friend, a disciple, one who had walked with Him, talked with Him, enjoyed His confidence, who had reclined at table with Him. The Lord had been seeking sympathy. Has Judas come to assure Him of support? The Lord had been craving the touch of a human hand, longing for the embrace of some one who loved Him. Has Judas come to console Him?

Judas has come, but his handclasp is the clammy touch of the traitor, his kiss is the kiss of a viper. In place of a word of comfort, he speaks the terrible salutation of the hypocrite, "Hail, Rabbi!"

Judas has received his retribution: all the world damns Judas. And it would seem that there was only one Judas in the history of mankind. Is there only one? Only one who has sat at the feet of Christ, looked into His eyes, called Him "Lord" and "Master," only one whose lips have been moistened with the Precious Blood in Holy Communion, only one whose tongue has been touched and hallowed by the flesh of Jesus, only one who has saluted Him, "My Lord and my God," and then has played the part of a traitor?

THIRTY-SEVENTH DAY

The Conflict for Chastity

THE interior conflict is particularly stern in matters that pertain to chastity. The strongest of human passions is love. And even when perverted, it still remains the strongest of passions. When love is pure, there is nothing nobler. When corrupted, there is nothing more base—*Corruptio optimi pessima.* Love leads to purity or, under aberration, to impurity. We would go through fire and water to indulge passion. We would brave the devil to overcome passion. Strange anomaly, strange contradiction! Our nature drives us toward sin, but the same nature shames us away from sin.

The nobler nature and the baser nature may fight interminably, and with tragic results, unless the nobler nature be reënforced by divine grace. Then the outcome need never be in question.

THIRTY-EIGHTH DAY

Civilization through Mary

CHRISTIAN civilization consists chiefly in the refinement of manners and the purification of morals; the suppression of brutality and of debauchery. Pagan civilization is different from the Christian chiefly in two things, cruelty and impurity. It is a significant fact that those two vices are always companions. The impure are always cruel like Herod and Nero and Caligula. Gladiatorial combats and Lupercalian orgies always go together. "Voluptuousness is not barren. It brings forth a daughter, Ferocity." Lust is more fruitful in murders and suicides than any other passion, not excepting greed. True civilization means the annihilation or—if annihilation be impossible—the minimizing of lust and cruelty in all their forms. Grant that, and we can see the great wisdom of the Catholic Church in setting before mankind the example of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. She would civilize us and Christianize us by gentleness and purity.

THIRTY-NINTH DAY

Hell

PEOPLE say that hell cannot be, for it is too terrible. Let us suppose that some second Rip Van Winkle was awakened from a long sleep during the World War, and suppose that he came down from the mountains, into the midst of the crowds standing about a war bulletin, and asked, "What's up?" Some patient citizen takes the poor ignoramus aside and explains to him: "The great war is on. All of Europe, and a great part of Asia and the ends of the earth, are blazing with warfare. This is no petty Revolutionary War or Civil War or Napoleonic War. It is a World War, raging along a line of hundreds of miles in the east and in the west. There are eight to ten million men in one army, and twelve to fourteen million men in the other. Warfare is covering the earth and the sea and the sky; even the waters under the earth are filled with death-dealing engines. Cities are bombarded from the sky; towns and villages swept off the map with great shells sent from sixty miles away; tens of thousands of corpses lying unburied in No Man's Land, where they putrefy and scatter pestilence." The new Rip Van Winkle would probably say: "It cannot be." It is too terrible. There is no war."

FORTIETH DAY

The Sins of the World

HOW quickly, how easily, how smoothly we say that phrase, "the sins of the world." How utterly nothing it means to us. But if we could look out, not upon the whole world, but upon one city, just for one night—nay, one moment of one night—what should we see? Upon the streets, unfortunate creatures, leering, and luring souls into unmentionable depravity. In a thousand rendezvous of vice, all manner of debauchery. In theaters and dance halls, indecency rampant. Unfaithful husbands, breaking the troth that was plighted before the altar of Christ.

Not only impurity, but cruelty, "man's inhumanity to man," that has made countless thousands mourn. The unbelievable savagery of the human heart manifest in war and in peace.

Irreligion. Millions of men and women, ignoring God, denying Him, or blaspheming against Him. Nineteen centuries after Christ, myriads of men who never say, "My God, my Savior, my Jesus."

Not only impurity, and cruelty, and irreligion, but a world of other sins. Saints have swooned at the imagination of it. Priests in the confessional have turned sick at heart when some infinitesimal fragments of it were whispered in their ears. But there was Jesus on that night in Gethsemane, saturated with the sin of the world; broken-hearted; crushed totally.

FORTY-FIRST DAY

Gethsemane

SIT you here till I go yonder and pray," said Jesus, and He began to be sorrowful and to be sad. And He said, "My soul is sorrowful even unto death. Sit you here and watch with Me," and He went forward a little and fell on His face and prayed, "Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass," and He cometh and findeth His disciples sleeping, and He saith to them, "Could you not watch one hour with Me?" Observe that we are called upon to pity our God. Jesus had always been the master of Himself and all about Him. He had always been easily in control of men and of nature, serene, calm, self-confident. But now the spirit that never had quailed, has given way. The lips that never before had murmured, are open with a cry of anguish. He that had always comforted the disciples, seeks comfort from them. He is restless with anguish. He kneels and He rises. He goes forward and returns. He flings Himself on the ground. He cries out to heaven, asking if the chalice may even yet be snatched away. He rises, He turns, gropes around in the darkness, feeling for the touch of a human hand, listening for the sound of a human voice to console Him. "He looketh for some one to have pity on Him and there was no man." From man He turns to God and from God He turns again to man, and there is no comfort either from God or from man.

FORTY-SECOND DAY

The Bloody Sweat

"HIS sweat became as drops of blood trickling down upon the ground." No lash, no scourge upon His back, no crown of thorns upon His head, no brutal fist had crashed against His face, no sword had pierced His side, no spikes were in His hands or feet, no one had touched Him—yet He was bleeding. The concentrated sin of the world, invisible, intangible, had taken Him in its powerful grip and crushed Him until His heart broke, and the blood oozed out from His veins, out through the pores of His skin, staining His garments and moistening the soil of the garden.

FORTY-THIRD DAY

Pilate

WE say that Pilate was a coward. It may be that we do him wrong. Perhaps there was no hero that ever lived who could have held out against the mob that day. A mob is always a frightful thing. In a mob, men are perhaps literally mad, but on that day Pilate was dealing with something even worse than a blood-craving mob. He was trying to stand against all hell. "This is your hour, and the power of darkness," Jesus had said, and there was awful meaning to His words. The gates of hell were opened, and the demons, though unseen, swarmed among the frantic Jews. There was something preternatural about the cries that broke against the stone walls of the palace of Pilate. We have never really heard "the cry of a lost soul." But it may be that Pilate heard the cries of myriads of demons that afternoon. It was hell's high holiday and every demon was in Jerusalem. The voices of men and devils mingled, and the result was enough to chill the heart of even the all-powerful and all-courageous God. When Pilate heard that shrill, *Crucifige! Crucifige!* he must have said: "These sounds are not the sounds of human voices. They are unearthly and diabolical. I cannot withstand the fury of hell." He wonders and shudders and surrenders. "Take Him," he says. "Take Him and crucify Him."

FORTY-FOURTH DAY

Nature Elevated by Holy Communion

ST. AUGUSTINE has a very significant sentence that describes the chief effect of Holy Communion. "Thou shalt not change Me into thine own substance, as thou changest the food of thy flesh, but thou shalt be changed into Mine" (*Confessions,* vii. 10). Tennyson says in *Locksley Hall,* speaking to one who had thrown herself away upon an unworthy companion, "The grossness of his nature shall have power to drag thee down." In the Holy Eucharist, the grossness of our nature shall not have power to drag God down. The divinity of His nature shall have power to lift us up. The Stronger elevates the weaker.

Man, the highest of creatures upon the earth, takes to himself the herbs of the earth, the grains of the field, the fruits of the trees. They become part of him. They become alive with a life that is human. They have been elevated to a scale of being beyond their own. In Holy Communion God takes unto Himself our poor human nature, absorbs it, assimilates it to His own, imparts to it a life that is superior to its own kind of life. The prayer at the Offertory in the Mass says beautifully, "O God Who hast most wonderfully created human nature and hast still more wonderfully restored it, grant that by this mystery of the mingling of the water with the wine, we may be made partakers of His divinity, Who became partaker of our humanity, Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Our Lord."

FORTY-FIFTH DAY

Calvary

THE contemplation of Calvary is heartbreaking. The very name *Golgotha* connotes a world of woe. The ghastly deeds done upon the hill outside Jerusalem are like a nightmare to devoted Christians. Even to the imagination the Crucifixion is a hideous thing. The swish of scourges upon naked flesh, the spatter of blood, the demoniacal cries of the mob of fanatics and murderers, the sound of the crunching of nails driven powerfully into human flesh and sinews, the inhuman shout of triumph when their Victim was nailed to His cross, the crude, coarse jesting, the blasphemous banter, all the unknown, incredible cruelty of an Oriental mob—it is enough to make the heart stand still with horror.

But we have no right to shrink from witnessing the tragedy of Calvary. If we know not Calvary, we know not Christ. We dare not, like cowardly Christians, omit the cross from our Christianity. God forbid we should glory except in the cross of Christ.

FORTY-SIXTH DAY

God Surrenders to Man

THERE is a passage in the *Following of Christ*, II., 11, in which à Kempis insists that nothing we can offer to God is acceptable unless we offer ourselves. "If a man give his whole substance, it is nothing. If he do great penance, it is but little. If he attain to all knowledge, he is far off still. If he have great virtue and very fervent devotion, there is still much wanting to him, the one thing which is supremely necessary to him." What is the one thing necessary? "That having given all things else to God he give himself."

Now, man, recognizing the demand of God that we surrender ourselves to Him, boldly retaliates with a demand that God surrender Himself to us. Man says to God, "Thou mayest multiply Thy favors; Thou mayest overwhelm me with gifts, but though Thy gifts, temporal and spiritual, be piled in mountains before me, my heart remains unsatisfied, my soul is discontent. I want not Thy gifts, I want Thee. Pardon, my God, if I speak boldly, I speak as Thou hast made me. Thou hast made me man, but Thou hast given me the cravings of a god. Thou mayest ransack all Thy universe, Thou mayest empty Thy treasure-house before my feet. Still I demand more, that Thou give me Thyself. Thou hast made me for Thyself. My heart remains empty until it be filled with Thee." The answer is the Incarnation and the Blessed Sacrament.

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